

The Question of Teacher Background and Quality Early Childhood Education. A Look at Some Selected Schools in the Winneba Municipality, Ghana

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Abstract

The study examined the current educational and professional background of early childhood educators involved in early childhood development in some selected schools in Winneba, Ghana; and how that affects quality of work in the classroom. The study adopted the descriptive survey type, using a sample of 127 early childhood educators randomly selected from early childhood centers and schools in the Winneba municipality. A questionnaire was administered to respondents based on 16 items within four domains: Background of educators, participation and organization of instruction, approach to growth and development, and organization of curriculum. Key findings indicated that most educators did not have the professional training in early childhood education. Based on the findings, a number of recommendations were made to address this important shortfall.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Teacher Background, Quality Teaching, Winneba, Ghana.

Introduction

The Government of Ghana, cognizant of its mandate for human development and the influence that Early Childhood Education (ECE) has in later life, has shown interest in improving the quality of early childhood programs offered for zero to eight year old children and their families at ECE centers in Ghana. Such interest even though laudable, undoubtedly cannot be attained if among other things, there is a lack of high quality teachers with the requisite skills and expertise in early childhood education. Quality education arguably depends on the ability, hard work, dedication, and most importantly the teachers' background and knowledge level in the specific subject area (Stronge, Ward, Tucker & Hindman, 2007).

Undisputedly, the teacher is considered the most important factor in the implementation of all programs concerning education at the foundational level. In fact as argued by Wayne & Young (2003), there cannot be good education without good teacher quality, and as stressed by Howes (1983), the key factor of teaching is the teacher because, as the author put it, education quality is always influenced by teaching effect. This link appears to be corroborated by Schulman (1988) cited in Jatto (1994) where in a study on teacher quality and student achievements at vocational schools, the author argues that educators cannot pretend that deficiencies in students' learning are unrelated to deficiencies in teachers' learning. The assumption underpinning the relationship between teacher background and teacher effectiveness undoubtedly is overwhelmingly accepted (Reeves and Robinson, 2010).

Notwithstanding the varied literature to support the direct correlation between teacher background and effective teaching, much of the forgoing policy discussions on incorporating early childhood education into mainstream formal educational practices in Ghana have overlooked the most fundamental unit of this process; the classroom, and the primary catalyst for the realization of such an agenda: the teacher.

A number of studies (see, for example, Boaler, 2002; Lin, et al, 2010; Stronge, et al, 2008) have revealed that, the quality of educational system of every country depends on the academic and professional qualification of its teachers and this observation naturally has a place in early childhood education. As a nation, quality early childhood education is a scientific thing to do. As a matter of fact it is an economic issue and most importantly, it is the right thing to do. It is important and necessary for Ghana if it is really committed to attaining middle income status by 2015 as touted in most of its policy proposals to take a critical look at the caliber of personnel involved in early childhood educational programs.

Naturally with such a proposal, it will be idle to argue that, the starting point to address the possibility of effective early childhood education in Ghana is to embark on a wide range inventory or audit of early childhood educators' subject matter knowledge and their teaching effectiveness. Therefore, this study sought to address

three major issues:

- 1) To explore the current educational background of early childhood educators involved in early childhood development within the Winneba municipality of Ghana.
- 2) To determine whether early childhood educators in the above mentioned municipality perceive their backgrounds to have any effect on their quality of work at early childhood centers, and
- 3) To discover measures and strategies that may be useful in addressing any associated challenges.

Of course, an examination of the background of teachers involved in early childhood education especially in a promising but neglected region such as Ghana is important because, as a result, findings will provide insight into the importance of training and developing qualified early childhood educators who are better able to help pupils achieve in learning and develop appropriately, as well as to direct the emphasis of ongoing teacher in-service training. With such an understanding in these areas, administrators, researchers, policy makers, as well as proprietors will be better positioned to come out with recommendations and alternatives to address any associated challenges.

Ghana and Early Childhood Education

Ghana as a nation had independence from Britain on 6th March 1957 under the leadership of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Prior to independence, Ghana used to be called the Gold Coast because of the abundance of gold in that part of the world. Currently, it is estimated that the total population of the country is about 24million people (2010 population census). The country shares border with Burkina Faso to the north, Togo to the east, Ivory Coast to the west, and the Gulf of Guinea to the south. The country has a number of natural resources such as gold (as evidenced in its colonial name), diamond, bauxite, timber, cocoa, and recently oil.

Ghana is divided into ten regions and a number of districts. In terms of education, the educational foundation of the nation was laid by the colonial masters (Ahia and Fredua-Kwarteng, 2012). Currently, the composition of Ghana's educational program consists of basic education which comprises kindergarten one through to class six, as well as junior high school. Secondary education consists of senior high school as well as associated technical and vocational training institutes. Secondary and basic educations are considered pre-tertiary education. Tertiary education on the other hand consists of polytechnics, teacher education colleges, universities and diploma awarding institutions.

With reference to early childhood development, it is viewed as a comprehensive approach to policies and programs for children from 0-8 years of age with active participation of their parents and care givers (Essa, 2007). Its purpose is to protect the rights of the child to develop his or her full cognitive, emotional, social, and physical potential. In Ghana, early childhood education is seen as encompassing nursery, kindergarten, and crèche.

This whole concept; that is pre-school, is seen as dating back to pre-independence Ghana. For example, according to Asemanyi and Wunku (2007), early programmers for the care and education of young children started as far back as in the middle 1940's. The authors argue that, before the first nursery unit was established by the Ministry of Education, Private and Voluntary Organizations, the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development were operating most programs for the care and education of young children. The 1992 constitution of Ghana accords education a high priority. The free, compulsory, Universal, Basic Education concept has been in place since 1996. These issues among others affirm Ghana's interest in early childhood education, and the nation's awareness of its relevance in the educational development of the learner.

Interestingly, it was not until the coming into being of the Education Strategic Plan (ESP; 2003 - 2015), that early childhood education became an integral component of mainstream formal education. As with ESP, the plan was set within the context of Education for All Goals, the Millenium Development Goals, Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy, and the President's Committee on the Review of Education Reform. At the highest level of the global development agenda espoused in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), education is emphasized as the key area of focus. Related to this, are a set of educational commitments known as Education for All (EFA) which further identifies specific areas of intervention among which include Early Childhood Education which according to UNESCO is foundational in building the wealth of a nation.

The Problem

Indeed the success or otherwise of any educational program among others is hinged on the quality and quantity of its teaching force, and Ghana is no exception. This lends credence to the common saying that, no education system rises above the quality of its teachers just as no nation rises above the level of her education (Adeyemi, 2004). In a study conducted by the National Day Care Study (Arnett, 1987) as cited in Essa (2007), findings

revealed that, “teachers with early childhood training were rated as more positive and less punitive, and employed a less authoritarian style of relating with pupils” (p.18). Thus teacher background and training has a direct effect on the quality of teaching.

That notwithstanding, data on the number of trained early childhood educators in Ghana reveals a shortage. For example, according to Asemanyi and Wunku (2007) in reference to the 2000 population census figures of Ghana, there were 6, 762 trained pre-school teachers representing just 18.5% of the total number of teachers required (p. 240). Also according to the Global monitoring Group Report (2008) which states, available data as of 2008 on qualified teachers who have received some training in early childhood education in Ghana stood at 25%.

Not many countries can perfect its educational foundation with most of its teaching force untrained. Training of early childhood educators is a necessary means of providing them with the knowledge, skill, and ability that are relevant to their professional lives as educators. It is against this background that this study has been conceptualized. That is, to examine the background of early childhood educators within the Winneba municipality as a means of coming out with some recommendations to help address challenges that may be confronting the program in Ghana.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, three research questions were formulated to guide the study.

- What are the qualifications of early childhood educators in the Winneba municipality?
- How do the qualifications of early childhood educators in the study area affect their duties in the classroom?
- What recommendations are necessary in the face of the research findings?

Methodology

This was a descriptive research of the survey type design which used a sample of 127 early childhood educators teaching at different levels drawn from 36 schools within the Winneba municipality. This design was considered most appropriate because the study aimed at eliciting the opinions of participants about how their respective backgrounds affected their output in class. The questionnaire used a five point-likert type scale of ‘strongly agree’ – 5 points, ‘agree’ – 4 points, ‘neutral’- 3 points, ‘strongly disagree’ - 2 points, ‘disagree’ – 1.

The questionnaire was administered to respondents based on 16 items within four domains: Background of educators, participation and organization of instruction, approach to growth and development, and organization of curriculum. The questionnaire consisted of both close, and open ended questions.

Results and Discussion

The main research question dealt with the background of early childhood educators and how it affected their output in the classroom. In discussing this overall question, three questions as previously discussed were carved. Results were discussed systematically with the sequence of research questions forming the order of discussion. On the question of whether early childhood educators in the area of study have the requisite training and knowledge in early childhood education; Table 1 below illustrates the data.

Table 1: Distribution of teacher's by background variables (N = 127)

Teacher background variable	Item	Number	%
Gender	Male	12	9.4
	Female	107	84.3
Teaching experience	Less than 2yrs	30	23.6
	2yrs-5yrs	56	44.0
	5yrs-10yrs	15	11.8
	More than 10yrs	16	12.6
Training in Early Childhood	Yes	70	55.1
	No	44	34.6
Major in Early Childhood	Yes	60	47.2
	No	51	40.2
Educational level	SSSCE/O Level	64	50.4
	Diploma	32	25.2
	Degree	16	12.6
	Masters	0	0.00

Table 1 provides a summary on gender differences, number of years of teaching, level of education and most importantly background in early childhood education. As evidenced in the responses presented in Table 1; 70 respondents, representing 55.1% of total participants (N= 127) described themselves as having some sort of training in early childhood education. However, when the question is narrowed down to a major in terms of academic credentials in early childhood education, the figure reduces to 60 respondents (47.2%).

A look at individual educational background reveals that, as a percentage of the total number of participants in the study, 50.4% (64 respondents) are SSSCE/O Level certificate holders (non- trained teachers), hence cannot be deemed qualified teachers equipped with the skills and knowledge of early childhood training . Based on this finding, it will be convenient to extrapolate from the above data, that at least 50.4% of participants in this study do not have the requisite training to teach at the early childhood level if certification is used as the basis of assessing qualification. Hence, most participants involved in early childhood education within the Winneba municipality as evidenced in this study are deemed untrained.

In furtherance to determining how teachers' background affected quality of work in the classroom, a questionnaire of a likert scale type as described in the methodology section of this study was used where participants were asked to respond to certain selected questions aimed at determining their basic understanding of developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom. Dimensions that characterize developmentally appropriate practices were synthesized from a meta-review of extant research by Charlesworth, Hart, & Burts (1993) cited in Frede (1995). From the review, developmentally appropriate teaching practices at the early childhood level were categorized into 3 broad areas. Tables 2 – 5 present responses by participants.

Table2:Summary of teacher's responses on teacher participation and organization of instruction (N=127)

Question	Response	Number	%
In my class learning centers provide opportunities for Writing, Reading Language, Games, and Dramatic Plays	SD	2	1.6
	D	2	1.6
	N	9	7.1
	A	57	44.9
	SA	44	34.6
In my class children are encouraged to critique their own work	SD	15	11.8
	D	10	7.9
	N	10	7.9
	A	58	45.7
	SA	21	16.5
In my class errors are viewed as normal and something from which children can learn	SD	5	3.9
	D	15	11.8
	N	10	7.9
	A	58	45.7
	SA	24	18.9

With responses regarding teachers' participation and organization of instruction, three issues were addressed.

First, participants had to respond to whether opportunities were created for learners to engage in Writing, Reading, Language, Games, and Dramatic Plays. In all 1.6% of the total number (N=127) strongly disagreed, 1.6% disagreed, 7.1% were neutral, while 44.9% agreed and 34.6% strongly agreed. In all, on the issue of what was taught in class, responses by participants can be described as manifesting in the use of developmentally appropriate practices as evidenced in 44.9% agreed and 34.6% strongly agreed.

In response to whether learners were allowed to critique their own work, majority of the responses were in the affirmative. As evidenced in table 2 above, 11.8% strongly disagreed, 7.9% disagreed, 7.9% neutral, while 45.7% agreed and 16.5% strongly agreed. Overall, responses by participants in encouraging learners to critique their lessons could also be described as developmentally appropriate. This is evidenced in an open-ended response by a participant of this study who indicated that; “teachers should be encouraged to see errors of pupils as normal, and to stop criticizing but to encourage child centered approach and games in learning”. A clear understanding on the part of educators to encourage learners to critique their own work as revealed in responses in this study is very much appreciated by teachers.

Responses on the last question pertaining to participation in organization and instruction could be described as similar to that of previous responses on the same subject. When participants were asked to respond to whether in their respective classrooms errors were viewed as normal and something from which children can learn; 3.9% of respondents strongly disagreed, 11.8% disagreed, 7.9% neutral, 45.7% agreed, while, 18.9% strongly agreed. Based on these responses it can be assumed that participants in this study viewed themselves as being involved in the participation and organization of instruction because after all, the teacher is the final arbiter of what is taught in the classroom (Schubert, 1986). In addition, the study also looked at teachers’ understanding of growth and development. Data in Table 3 below provides accurate description of responses.

Table 3: Summary of teacher’s responses on growth and development (N=127)

Question	Response	Number	%
In my class I evaluate work against what the whole class does	SD	22	17.3
	D	10	7.9
	N	9	7.1
	A	54	42.5
	SA	24	18.9
In my class everyone is expected to acquire the same narrowly defined skills	SD	27	21.3
	D	39	30.1
	N	12	9.4
	A	27	21.3
	SA	14	11.0
In my class everybody does the same thing at the same time	SD	15	11.8
	D	42	33.1
	N	14	11.0
	A	31	24.4
	SA	14	11.0

As revealed in Table 3 above, three important questions characterized the issue of early childhood educators’ understanding of growth and development. First, on the question of whether class evaluation was done against the whole class or individually, responses as evidenced in Table 3 reveals that, 17.3% strongly disagreed, 7.9% disagreed, 7.1 % neutral, 42.5% agreed, and 18.9% strongly disagreed.

In addition, on the question of whether learners are expected to acquire the same narrowly defined skills, 21.3% of participants strongly disagreed, while 30.1% disagreed, 9.4% neutral, 21.3% agreed, and 11.0% strongly agreed.

The third question relating to teachers understanding and appreciation of growth and development dwelt on class assignments and projects. When asked to respond to the question; in my class everybody does the same thing at the same time, responses revealed; 11.8% strongly disagreed, 33.1% disagreed, 11.0% neutral, 24.4% agreed, and 11.0% strongly agreed.

A review of responses on the question of teachers understanding of growth and development reveals that, on a critical issue such as evaluation in an important sector such as early childhood education, 61.4% (42.5% plus 18.9%) of respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively to assessing class work to what the whole class does. Reasons for such responses unfortunately were not adduced because responses were analyzed after questionnaires were returned. This notwithstanding, one will not hesitate to classify such orientation as an act of

developmentally inappropriate practice and a clear manifestation of some of the many challenges associated with early childhood education in Ghana.

Lastly, this study also sought to find out early childhood educators' understanding of curriculum organization. In this direction, three questions guided the inquiry and responses are revealed in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Summary of teacher's responses on organization of curriculum (N=127)

Question	Response	Number	%
In my class I direct what should be taught and how it should be taught	SD	3	2.4
	D	10	7.9
	N	6	4.7
	A	44	34.6
	SA	34	26.8
In my class, I lecture to the whole group instead of individual pupils	SD	29	22.8
	D	14	11.0
	N	4	3.1
	A	45	35.4
	SA	27	21.2
In my class exercise are conducted using paper and pencil, work books, and worksheets	SD	12	9.4
	D	6	4.7
	N	6	4.7
	A	66	51.9
	SA	34	26.8

Table 4 above presents responses by participants on the question of curriculum organization. Three important questions guided the determination of participants' organization of curriculum. Results in Table 4 reveals that, when early childhood educators involved in this study were asked the question; in my class I direct what should be taught and how it should be taught, 2.4% strongly disagree, 7.9% agree, 4.7% neutral, 34.6% agree, and 26.8% strongly agree. On the question of mode of instruction, that is whether participants engaged in lecture of the whole class instead of individual pupils; 22.8% strongly disagree, 11.0% disagree, 3.1% neutral, 35.4% agree, and 21.2% strongly agree. With reference to class exercises and assignments, it is clearly evident as presented in Table 4, that paper and pencil texting is the order of the day.

Overall, responses by participants on the question of organization of curriculum clearly suggest that teaching approaches is dominated by adult control manifesting in teacher directed lessons, lecture, and paper and pencil testing as a means of assessment which according to Frede (1995) may not help children develop overall coping skills.

Conclusion

The focal point of this study was to take an inventory of the background of personnel involved in early childhood education with specific reference to whether they have specialization in the field of early childhood education and how that may affect the quality of teaching in the classroom. By quality, the study aimed at eliciting responses of participants on how certain fundamental concepts such as; participation and organization of instruction, organization of curriculum, and approach to growth and development are addressed in the classroom. Key findings confirm that responses by participants dwelling on developmentally appropriate practices as defined by Charlesworth, Hart, & Burts (1993) cited in Frede (1995) were positive (that is; strongly agreed, and agreed).

Besides and more revealing, this study brings to bear the challenge that we face as a nation when it comes to qualified professional early childhood educators. And that, when it comes to early childhood education in Ghana, this study goes to confirm the argument that, notwithstanding government's interest and commitment in making early childhood education an important contributor to the developmental aspirations of the nation, early childhood education as an important subsector of the educational system is still bedeviled with a lot of challenges, critical among which is lack of qualified teachers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made.

1. The need for a more robust approach by government with regards to early childhood teacher training. There is clear evidence of shortage of qualified early childhood personnel especially at private

institutions.

2. The need for continual in service teacher training, and this should be a requirement for re-accreditation especially on the part of private early childhood centers.
3. Pre-service early childhood teacher training should place much emphasis on providing the teacher-trainee the necessary skills of being able to involve the class in classroom activities as opposed to being stoic instructors.
4. Registration, monitoring and periodic supervision of activities of early childhood education providers needs to be encouraged and adhered to.

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